



V i r g i n i a C o m m o n w e a l t h U n i v e r s i t y

**Partnership for
People with
Disabilities**

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Supporting Military Families with Children with Disabilities

The Partnership for People with Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University, a university center for excellence in developmental disabilities funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is developing a project to support military families living in the Commonwealth of Virginia who have children (birth to 25 years) with developmental disabilities. The project will model a "one-stop shop" where these families can receive at a minimum:

- information and referrals regarding: special education services and placements, health care and related financing, disability services through Virginia's system, and other community resources;
- a family assessment and service consultation to identify needs and develop a family empowerment plan;
- peer-to-peer support connecting families with children with developmental disabilities both in the community and on base.

These activities will support military families to assist their children with disabilities to achieve their maximum potential; will support children and youth with disabilities of military families to exercise greater choice and self-determination; and will support military parents and their children with disabilities to engage in leadership activities in their communities.

Families with children and youth who have developmental disabilities face many challenges in meeting their child's special health, education, and life needs. Often these families must deal with agencies whose policies conflict and who may not encourage family involvement. Military families face additional challenges, because with each relocation they must develop new systems of support. Virginia reportedly has the largest number of school-aged dependents of military personnel of any state (124,000), translating to a *minimum* of 12,400 school-aged children with disabilities (out of 175,000 total statewide). At least 5,000 children in Tidewater area alone are enrolled in the Department of Defense's Exceptional Family Member Program.

The Partnership seeks to collaborate with military families and military and community leaders to provide supports and services that simplify military family life. We envision outcomes that encompass:

- Individual Support: Information and resources to help military families collaborate with professionals, civilian and military, in making decisions and accessing supports.
- Peer Support: One-to-one support via a network of experienced and trained military parents.
- Systems Support: Collaboration of military parents and professionals from many disciplines to improve disability services in Virginia and to simplify the process of making connections to services for military families relocating to and from Virginia.

Our vision for a national model includes the following:

- To improve the continuity of care between military and civilian medical and other treatment services;
- To assist families living off base access services available to them both on and off base (e.g., respite, emergency preparedness)
- To translate civilian services between states in the event of a transfer
- To support families in making decisions about school districts and special education related advocacy
- To complement efforts of the EFMP coordinators in supporting families in the use of civilian services
- To collaborate with the EFMP coordinators in case management strategies
- To support EFMP coordinators in times of high turnover of staff and families
- To ensure that families, EFMP coordinators and civilian service providers are working together to minimize fragmentation of services
- To assist school divisions and the VDOE in developing strategies to provide education to a growing number of students whose stay may be temporary
- To empower families to advocate for themselves in the civilian service arena

The Partnership proposes to accomplish our objectives:

- 1) by hiring a director, five full-time civilians who are knowledgeable about Virginia's disability service delivery systems and a minimum of five parents representing four branches and Coast Guard to serve as "Navigators" so that:
 - Parents and professionals from multiple disciplines will develop a regionally-based program together, each representing a branch that can be served by any one region; and
 - In the event of one or more transfers, there is continuity among the remaining navigators and support for new navigators;
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- 2) by creating a robust interactive community website that functions as the Navigator's assistant;
- 3) by creating a network of military family members and EFMP coordinators that sustains the Navigator function of the website; and
- 4) by maintaining the strength of the family unit as the focus of all services and collaborations through individual support, peer support, and systems support.